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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the problem of sexism and violence in music videos that present conflict resolutions in domestic violence situations. Research suggests a positive relationship between violence in the home coupled with violence on television and subsequent aggression in individuals. This study examined the effects of this conflict resolution mode on adolescent viewers and assessed the degree to which adolescent participants comprehend themes and messages in music videos. Adolescents (n=106) responded to a questionnaire on the portrayal of males and females in music videos. Subjects were shown three current rock videos. One video depicted an abused female responding aggressively, the second video showed an abused female acting in a prosocial way, the last depicted the abused female responding regressively. Results indicated that the participants who watched the most violent video were most aggressive in their responses. The violent video was most arousing. Males were more retaliatory than female participants, who appeared more fearful and apprehensive. Participants who watched the regressive video were more despondent. Subjects appeared to be video literate, and moods, cognition and attitudes were affected. (BHK)

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Miller, Marilyn A..,THE EFFECTS OF MUSIC VIDEOS ON ADOLESCENT MEANING CONSTRUCTION AND ATTITUDES TOWARD PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AS A METHOD OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION, August, 1990.

This study addresses the problem of sexism and violence in music videos presenting conflict resolutions in domestic violence scenarios. It examines the effects of the conflict resolution mode on adolescent viewers and assesses the degree to which adolescent participants comprehend themes and messages in the music videos shown. Participants saw music videos as sexist. Violent responses corresponded with the most violent video.

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This study addresses the problem of sexism and violence in music videos presenting conflict resolutions in domestic violence situations. It examines what effects the conflict resolution mode has on adolescent viewers and assesses the degree to which adolescent participants comprehend themes and messages in music videos. Adolescents responded to a questionnaire on the portrayal of males and females in music videos. Three current videos were then shown to adolescent subjects which depicted responses to female abuse in the home. The first, demonstrated aggressive responses; the second, regressive responses; and the third, prosocial responses. Adolescents responded to a mood assessment, a comprehension check, and a violence response section. A 2x2x3 ANOVA was used to assess effects of video condition by sex and by two different populations, i.e, a rural community and a college town community.

Results indicated that the participants who watched the most violent video were most aggressive in their responses. The violent video was most arousing. Males were more retaliatory than female participants. Participants comprehended 80% of vid o themes and messages. Participants saw music videos as sexist with the college town students seeing more sexism than the rural town students. A majority of adolescents in the study watched music videos.

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Aerosmith Revisited: Music Videos and Adolescent Construction of Meaning

> The world of reality has its bounds, the world of imagination is boundless; as we cannot enlarge the one, let us restrict the other; for all the sufferings which really make us miserable arise from the difference between the real and the imaginary. (Rousseau, cited in Wilden, 1987, p. 67)

Music videos are the books of imagination "read" by our children. They contain stories of violence, greed, lust, obsession, intimacy, horror, and fun. Over the past decade music videos have created controversy and concern for the adults who believe that adolescent adherence to the cultural norms of the society is a way to create and recreate what is desired for the population. Thus concerned, adults might agree with Rousseau that it is necessary to restrict imagination for child protection and control within the dominant ideology. Violence, sexism, drug and alcohol use and abuse which are part of the pervasive problem of providing an appropriate environment for the developing adolescent have become an issue, this time linked with the new favorite, music video. The concern in the late sixties, and seventies with violence on television stirred up controversy. Social psychologists, sociologists, and educators investigated implications, but violence was defended by television producers as inextricably connected to dramatic "slice of life" and too loosely linked to violent behavior. The eighties brought together the old issues of television and possible harmful effects on viewers with the new combined music and visual phenomenon, music videos. Parent

groups involved the United States Senate to investigate the effects of music videos on adolescents. The concern continues with the explicit lyrics found in "rap" music, and continuing violence and sexism.

Recently, during the music video awards, a particular video mosaic received recognition as the best "metal" video of the year, "Janie's Got a Gun" by Aerosmith. Mosaic may be an appropriate term since the video in the five minute duration boasted an average of 45.5 frames per minute to a total of 257 frames (Miller, 1990, p. 89). In December 1989, as a communication researcher, I began a project contextualizing that particular video with two other music videos released that month which described the dilemma of domestic violence. I watched the Aerosmith video claim the number one position (number of aggressive frames, 51.1%) and the other two videos, Madonna's "Oh, Father" (aggressive frames, 21.2%), and Tears for Fears' "Woman in Chains" (aggressive frames, 16.5%) drop off the chart or never make the top sixty. I wondered if the key to popularity was the violence. I still wonder.

Many hours of data collection and analysis later, I reframe my hypothesis and my results. I was drawn to domestic violence as a theme and the possible differences in adolescent response evoked by the performers. Aerosmith was the only performer who suggested that retaliation is an appropriate response to abuse in the home. Janie shot her father after years of sexual abuse: "He <u>tried</u> the little, bitty baby/ The man has got to be insane." Janie experienced frustration and fear since no one was available to help

her resolve the conflict in a less devastating way: "Because nobody believed her." Janie's terror of the sexual assault continuation motivated her to load a gun, and as her father turned toward her at his desk in the study, she ended his life and her immediate pain. The message is clear, "Run, run, run away from the pain." And if that doesn't work, "put a bullet in his brain." "Now when Janie was arrested, they found him underneath the train./ But man he had it comin' now that Janie's got a gun/ He ain't never gonna be the same." He wasn't. An appropriate resolution to violence? At least a conclusive end, since the violence toward Janie by her father did end. But the popularity of the video and its effects on the adolescent population--many, many watched the video during December and January--has implications for mediated violence on adolescents.

Research suggests that there is a positive relationship between violence in the home coupled with violence on television and subsequent aggression in individuals (Heath, Kruttschnitt, & Ward, 1986). All three domestic violence videos premiered around the holidays. Since holidays are prime times for increased domestic violence, the aggression in "Janie's Got a Gun" had potential of increasing violent responses by the "abused" if in fact adolescents are imitating modeled aggression in music videos.

The other two videos, the Tears for Fears' release, "Woman in Chains," and Madonna's, "Oh, Father," denigrated violence and instead beckoned passivity and forgiveness. Tears for Fears proposed forgiveness, understanding, and, then, giving society the

rap. They said this is a problem created by a system that hands to males and females a stereotypic role to play and in its throes emerge the social problems inherent in a "Great White Hope" and a "woman in chains." One of the students involved in the study suggested that the woman's chains were her love for the man (not bad for a seventeen year old). In contrast, Madonna asks for resolve from the female victim not to stay with the abuser. "You can't hurt me now!/ I got away from you,/ I never thought I could." Perhaps appropriate messages were sent by Tears for Fears and Madonna, but they weren't watched by the majority of adolescent viewers. Why was the violent video, "Janie's Got a Gun" so provocative for the adolescents, and what are the effects of that extensive watching?

Those are important questions if educators, parents, and watchdogs for the survival of civilization via adolescent development and control are interested in realities of the adolescent world. That is the issue and the provocation for research on the comparison between the three videos in a study done at the University of Wyoming in the spring of 1990 (Miller). That study justified the fears of music video effects on the developing adolescent.

Copies of the three videos which offered alternative solutions to the issue of domestic violence were obtained by the researcher. A questionnaire was constructed based on the best available models in communication and mass media research. The first section of a three part instrument surveyed adolescent viewing patterns and

attitudes toward music videos in general with specific focus on adolescents' understanding of music video female and male presentation and interaction with parents. The second part of the questionnaire followed the viewing of one of the three videos selected, and pinpointed adolescent moods and cognitions, mental processing, and response to violence: "If you were the victim in this video, how do you think that you would have responded?" Finally, the adolescents targeted for the study wrote a video narrative description. 106 adolescents revealed attitudes, moods, and responses which have important implications for educators and parents.

Most importantly, the adolescents who watched Janie shoot her father in the Aerosmith video responded that retaliation was a more appropriate response than the adolescents who watched the more passive and regressive responses modeled in the other two videos. Those results were statistically significant based on the SPSS computer analysis program (Miller, 1990). Those adolescents were also more positively aroused than the students who watched the more passive and less violent videos. The adolescents were more despondent at Madonna's seeming sadness at not being able to change her circumstances. She remained in the snow-whitened field with fierce determination on her face but absolutely alone. The participants in the study recognized her reaction not as effective resolution but as ineffective indulgence. Perhaps they're right.

However, the adolescents saw Janie as strong and no longer crippled by her circumstances. They noted her lack of choice in

the matter: her father's power rendered her impotent; Janie's gun rendered her potent. The woman in the Tears for Fears' video took back the boxer, loved him, allowed him to rape her, and (sound familiar) continued the "chained" melody. Did the adolescents understand the message of the Aerosmith video? Did they reject the messages and the context, style, and artistry of the second two?

The ability to "read" (Fiske, 1987) music video text is in itself an accomplishment. (Parents and teachers, try sitting down next to your youngster and understand the story line and message of the music video blaring from the television screen.) One respondent who accidentally happened onto the experiment, a twenty-four year old college student reported, "I really wasn't able to follow the video. There were so many quick cuts between the story and live shots of the group performing that I had no idea what was going on." Conversely a sixteen year old female did understand as did the largest percentage of her peers (comprehension, 80%). She wrote, "This video is about a girl whose father raped her. Her mother found out and he knew it. Janie killed her Dad because she didn't like what he was doing" (Miller, 1990). Our adolescents are video literate. They can read message and meaning.

Adolescents are, in fact, being affected: moods, cognition, and attitudes by music videos. Their immediate response following retaliatory violence is to be retaliatory. Males, exhibiting gendered stereotypes, are more retaliatory than females. Females are more fearful and apprehensive, another gendered stereotype, a

gift from society whose dominant ideology embraces the powerful, dominant male and the passive, powerless female. Adolescents are learning their roles from music videos and their violence, according to the "in the short run" implications of the study. Temporarily, at least, they are affected. In the long run, their immediate interaction with the "real" environment may be changed and the "real" world become altered via mood and cognitive changes provoked by the video. Those implications are "real." However, the issue of the study for parents and educators must go further than this understanding of the effects of music videos on adolescents. As significant adults to an adolescent audience, we must be aware of adolescent construction of meaning.

The first day of school this year, I played the three videos used in the University of Wyoming study for the five classes of general high school English as an introduction to the study of language arts. I was amazed at how easily the students understood characterization, plot, initial incident, theme, and even denouement that they read into the music video (ah, if only they saw so easily those literary elements in Macbeth). Clearly looms the task of the educator, to help adolescents construct the intimate link between visuals they understand and words which have no meaning. Educators and parents must facilitate that linkage.

I wonder at adults' fears of the symbols in music videos without understanding symbols in context of adolescent meaning construction. The fears belong to adults' lack of video literacy,

fears of images. Adults must seek to know, instead, what the child sees; what meanings the child creates, for, in fact, individuals do create meaning. Meaning is not located within something; meaning is created out of the experiences of the person, whether or not that person may be reading, "Is this a dagger I see before me?" or the video visuals of "Janie's Got a Gun."

I do not intend to infer that music videos are harmless; overt aggression and sexism create a world of continued domination and control of individuals with lower status. I do think, however, that we must become involved in conversation with our children to anticipate the "real" harms and to then constructively help them to understand a different point of view. Results of the study suggested that participants' parents do not watch or discuss music television with their children. While 87% of the participants indicated that their parents watched television with them, only 26% revealed that parents watched MTV with them and a meager 15% confessed that parents discussed MTV with them (Miller, 1990, p. 106). Females did report that their parents talked with them more often about music videos than males in the study; those results were statistically significant (p. 111). How can an adult understand the child's meaning without ever watching what the child watches? Adults, in contrast, ask/require that children understand the adult world. Adults ask them to read the news and stories in literature anthologies and the great novels of the world without helping young people to integrate their world of pictures, which have specific and clear meaning for them, with the adult world of

words. The results of the descriptive part of the survey were clear. Adolescents construct individual meanings for their world. They understand thematic messages. They do "get" it; however, "it" is necessarily different from the message parents and teachers might construct, especially the video illiterate.

As an English, theatre, speech, and communication teacher, I often ask a child to reread literature the child doesn't understand. How long has it been since you reread their literature, music videos, until you understood? Perhaps it's time to try.

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